

Sandrew Travel Prize Report – Benoit Mes

Over the 2023 summer vacation I had the incredible opportunity to travel and research in the United States. Thanks to the generous support of the Sandrew Travel Grant alongside a short-term research fellowship with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History I was able to visit New York, Washington DC, Princeton, and New Haven during my 3-week trip. My time in the US allowed me to complete key primary research for my undergraduate thesis on interracial relationships prior to the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Beyond archival research I also had the opportunity to engage with my subject and learn about American culture more broadly by visiting some museums along the way.

My first week in the US was spent in New York where I visited the Columbia University archives and consulted New York Public Library collections at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. At these two locations I was able to consult a vast number of records that related to practically all parts of the US. Most of my time at Columbia was spent at their Center for Oral History, where I listened to audio recordings from interviews conducted with civil rights and women's rights activists. In the interviews I consulted interviewees commented on their own interracial relationships as well as the ways in which interracial relationships had been perceived within their communities. The sources I came across at Schomburg Center in Harlem were particularly revealing. For example, many articles, pamphlets, and clippings in the collection not only gave an insight into the lives of those in interracial relationships during the 1940/50/60s but also outlined the debate surrounding the issue that existed at the time. While in New York I also had the opportunity to visit the New York Historical Society Museum where I particularly enjoyed the installation on Frederick Douglass and his vision for America.



First Research Day – Columbia University

During my second week in the US, I visited Washington DC and researched mainly at the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress holds a significant portion of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) records including those of the NAACP Legal Defence Fund. As such I came across correspondence, court documents, and amicus briefs

pertaining to a range of different key cases that challenged anti-miscegenation laws. For example, there were files on *Perez v. Sharp* (1948), *Naim v. Naim* (1955), and *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). The NAACP organisational records also proved useful with many folders containing documents related to the scandal that followed Walter White's, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, high profile divorce from Gladys Powell and subsequent remarriage to a white woman, Poppy Cannon. The media surrounding this high-profile scandal related to an interracial marriage particularly shed light on how interracial relationships were perceived by some in African American communities and in the broader Civil Rights Movement. In DC I also visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Visiting the NMAAHC was a truly amazing experience – across six floors the museum showcased Black History in the United States from the transatlantic slave trade up to the election of President Barack Obama as well as musical, artistic, sporting, and other culturally significant moments for the Black community in America.



Library of Congress



NMAAHC – Loving Exhibit

The remainder of my trip was split between Princeton and New Haven. The Princeton University Archives are home to the papers of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a legal organisation which was involved in a number of cases that challenged bans on interracial marriage. Most notably ACLU lawyers represented Mildred and Richard Loving in their 1967 Supreme Court case. At Princeton I was also able to consult the papers of John Marshall Harlan, a Supreme Court Justice on the Loving case.



Princeton Firestone Library

The final stop on my trip was New Haven and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at Yale University. At the Beinecke Library I was able to further investigate the relationship between Walter White and Poppy Cannon as well as the scandal that followed their marriage. Walter and Poppy's papers are held at the Beinecke allowing me to come across letters documenting their affair and the reaction of family members on both sides to their marriage.



Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library

I had an amazing trip, and I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to visit the US for my first ever time conducting archival research. I am equally grateful that during my research I was able to engage with American culture and history while visiting quite a few different towns and cities in a relatively short timeframe – something that was made possible by the generous support of the Sandrew Travel Grant.